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SUBJECT: CUBA AFTER FIDEL'S RESIGNATION: DAY TWO

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly, reasons 1.2 (b) AND (d)

1.(C) Summary. Cuba remains calm two days after Fidel Castro,s announcement that he would step down as President and Commander-in-Chief in the wake of this Sunday's (2/24) election. Yet throughout the country there is a sense of expectation, if not outright excitement, that was kicked off by Fidel,s surprise announcement, aided and abetted by the long-anticipated visit of Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone, and fueled by rampant rumor and speculation at all levels of Cuban society. People here are aware that the eyes of the world are on Cuba, and as a result many are analyzing every scrap of information and debating every piece of news, not for what they actually say, but for what they might mean in the larger scheme of things. The U.S. Interests Section is not immune to this quiet fervor, and offers the following modest anecdotes and observations for the mix. End summary.

12. (C) COM Michael Parmly met with Newsweek reporter Joe Contreras 2/20 for an off-the-record session at his residence. Contreras remarked that whereas in the past he had experienced considerable difficulty entering the country "They really do hate me here", this time he sailed through passport check and customs unchallenged. True, he had come as anonymously as possible from his home base in Mexico since he was not "street-legal," as he put it, leaving his blue blazer, press credentials, laptop computer, and even spiral notebooks and pens at home. He had learned this technique on previous trips when blazered and laptop-bearing colleagues were turned away at the airport while he was admitted under the guise of rumpled history professor or free-lance book author. This time, however, it may not have made any difference; properly attired and equipped reporters from other countries were also allowed into Cuba with little or no questioning. This experience stood in stark contrast to the GOC,s attitude after Raul Castro,s &proclama8 of July 31, 2006, when droves of reporters were turned away at the border and the down-dressing Contreras still managed to get in.

13. (C) BusinessWeek reporter Geri Smith arrived in Havana Sunday 2/17 for her first visit to Cuba in eight years. Asked whether she was here to cover the election, she replied "I am now." It turns out the GOC had finally granted her a visa after a 14-month wait. It could well be that the timing of her visa was coincidental, but her experience, coupled with that of Newsweek,s Contreras, could lead one to conclude that Cuban government officials are anything but reluctant to have the international press cover Sunday's historic event.

14. (C) A member of a prominent youth organization in Santiago de Cuba, Juan Carlos Hernandez Hernandez, who is well known to USINT,s human rights officer, was in the Cathedral Plaza yesterday (2/20) where Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone will hold a mass later today. Like many other Cubans, he hopes to hand some documents over to the Cardinal. He said he noticed an increased presence of police he personally recognized as being from the provinces of Holguin, Oriente, and Santiago de Cuba. He was stopped by the police, had his CAMBIO bracelet removed, was questioned about what he was doing in Havana, and ordered to return to Santiago. Subsequently he spoke by telephone with his family in Santiago and was told that a security official had dropped by and warned family members to stop his activities. Asked about Fidel,s resignation, Hernandez said that no one in Santiago expected major changes. He said that Raul will probably make gestures to the international community by releasing more political prisoners while continuing his repressive campaign against youth, which may in fact worsen.

15. (C) On the other hand, human rights lawyer Rene Gomez Manzano told PolOff 2/21 that he is very optimistic (while acknowledging most opposition figures disagree), saying he believes that the GOC will proceed with economic reforms that make owning a small business and engaging in private agriculture easier. He also believes Raul will retain some title for himself, but not all three (first secretary of the communist party, head of the council of ministers, and head of the council of state), effectively bringing more people into government by spreading out the titles more widely. Finally, he believes there will be a quote, "sizeable" release of political prisoners in the near future.  
PARMLY